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ABSTRACT

A study explored learners' understanding of their own changing perceptions as they study the theory and research of aging and track their development in personal journals. The writings of 280 graduate and undergraduate students in gerontology classes, aged 18-75, were analyzed for personal assessments of their own learning. Among the themes that emerged, personal transitions and psychological transformations were prominent. Specifically cited were generational awareness, differentiation of others' meaning systems, and the realization that growth can be a costly emotional process. Taken as a whole, it is clear that adult learning is very dynamic. It involves differentiation--separation from what one knew before--and reconnection--seeing things in a new light. (Contains 24 references.) (YLB)

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TRANSFORMATIONS WITHIN THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

"The light bulb just went on."

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Abstract

As students explore aging concepts from a human development perspective, they experience an array of cognitive and affective shifts. Using a constructive developmental framework, this paper explores the experiences of students in gerontology (N=280) who discuss their own growing awarenesses of the aging process.

Social development is, in essence, the restructuring of the

1) concept of self,
2) in its relationship to concepts of other people
3) conceived as being in a common social world with social standards.

L. Kohlberg

Educators are struck by the variety of cognitive and affective connections that illuminate learning for the student. The learner can be transformed through a zone in which he or she connects with material in the educational setting. This phenomenon, ontological in nature, occurs frequently in the gerontology classroom where the content is the theory and research of aging. Emotion and cognitive dimensions combine to make new classroom meaning for the learner. As one student said recently, "Ah, the light bulb just went on!" In essence, learning is an active process on the part of the student and involves more than a review of content and fact; it requires a schematic restructuring.

Of teaching, Lev Vygotsky once observed:

Practical experience shows that direct teaching of concepts is impossible and fruitless. A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty

> verbalism, a parrotlike repetition of words. . .simulating a knowledge of corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum. (1975, p. 83)

Most educators hope not to simply cover up a vacuum, but rather to lead students toward critical thinking, growth, and scholarly pursuits. This goal requires new meaning-making for each learner.

But how *do* connections occur for students? How does this reconstruction of assumptions come about within the educational environment? What is the adaptation process that the student undergoes as he or she learns, whether it is a fundamental change or transformation, or merely a change of habit in thinking? And how can we research this transformation of meaning through learning? Educators (Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1982; Merriam, 1998; Mezirow, 1991, 1990; and others) have analyzed the educator's role in creating an environment for this personal restructuring.

> The transformational side of the self refers to the continued development of the self throughout life. New interactions between the self and others create opportunities for restructuring self-understandings, including reconstructing the past and reorienting in the present. (Noam, no date, p. 94)

Transformation

Transformation, psychosocial developmental growth, and commitment to learning often accompany educational experiences. Indeed, this realization of the transformational power for adult learners has led to some interesting insights into learning theory (Beatty & Wolf, 1996; Brookfield, 1986, 1987, 1989; Cross, 1981; Daloz, 1986, 1988; Mezirow, 1990, 1991.) It is now a basic tenet of adult education that some

learners seek to use the educational experience for personal tasks (Beatty & Wolf, 1996; Wolf 1989; Wolf & Leahy, 1998). As Jack Mezirow (1991) has observed,

> There is a need for a learning theory that can explain how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experiences, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional. (p. xii)

Constructive Developmentalism

We are aware that individuals construct meaning through a dynamic interaction with events or environmental stimuli. In Robert Kegan's (1982, 1997) model of object relations, a process of "decentering" occurs. The individual has a new perspective; "making object" is the means by which one "sees" former perceptions or assumptions. An "object" may be part of oneself that has now been outgrown. In detaching from a previously held assumption, one experiences a transition in making meaning. Kegan's (1982) model for personal growth is based on a progression of object-related perceptions. An "object" is sometimes a part of ourselves that we only now begin to discern. Therefore, we are constantly moving into and out of perceptions, looking at our past and creating our future. The earliest "object" is considered to be the parent; the infant sees the parent as attached to him or her until about the age of six months "object permanence" occurs (Piaget, 1969). At each stage of development, the individual explores some aspect of the world; the transitions between these stages are sometimes restless periods of searching.

Education serves as an environment for transitions: participants enter the learning environment to "make object of" or to throw off a former stage of their lives and to "study" their own future. We know that journals of learners reflect growing consciousness of inner changes, transformations and new awarenesses. The "objects" or past assumptions are often previously held meanings. "My own image of a life," observed Jerome Kagan,

> is that of a traveler whose knapsack is slowly filled with doubts, dogma, and desires during the first dozen years. Each traveler spends the adult years trying to empty the heavy load in the knapsack until he or she can confront the opportunities that are present in each fresh day. (1984, p. 280)

This paper explores learners' understanding of their own changing perceptions as they study the theory and research of aging and track their development in personal journals.

The Study

The writings of students in gerontology classes (N=280), graduate and undergraduate, ages 18-75, are analyzed for personal assessments of their own learning. Among the themes that emerged, personal transitions and psychological transformations were prominent. Specifically cited here are generational awareness, differentiation of others' meaning systems, and the realization that growth can be a costly emotional process.

Generational awareness

For many young students, the awareness of aging can refer to their parents' situations. For the first time, many young adults realize that their own parents are

mortal. This awareness can occur in many ways. An 18-year-old nursing student reflected on her new relationship with her mother:

> *It's everything that one just never thinks about.* In the past year, I have gotten so close to my mother, and although I've always been close to her, we now share a lot more. The major issue that I'm dealing with is that I'm very much overprotective of my Mom. She's always been overprotective of me and I hated it. I always said that I would have to go and live away from her when I get old enough. *Now I find myself wanting to stay close to her.* When I plan for the future, I want a home, a job in an area that is not too far from my Mom. I just find it amazing that as we go through life, we change our views so much and we become a person who thinks and acts like our parents! The same parents what we thought were crazy a few years ago. Being in this class really opened my eyes.

A 24-year-old graduate student found himself in a new category:

> This week's reading assignment was I Never Sang for My Father. I couldn't seem to put it down till I had finished it. I got a strange feeling in my stomach as the play progressed *knowing that I could be Gene someday.* I find it a surprise that I am relating to Gene as being me in the future instead of—if I read this a couple of years ago--relating to him as my father. I may only be 24 and my parents in their 40's, but I am thinking in such a way that, well, scares me . . .

A 28-year-old female chose to interview her father for a project on middle age "because I do not know many people who are middle aged." She observed: "This decision was in

many ways not only eye-opening but life changing. I will never quite interact the same way with my father as I had before." A 30-year-old woman observed:

> I found important information about my own development. I have learned to take a step back and objectively view my own interpersonal relationships and myself. My fears of losing my parents to death and my existing relationship with my husband have been reevaluated.

And a 34-year old student wrote:

> I found reading Robert Anderson's I Never Sang for My Father to be a moving and powerful experience. Partially, this is because it is recognized in my family that when the time comes I will be the designated caretaker. Therefore, I took in on a very personal level the protagonist's role reversal with his parents, his attempts to maintain dignity in the midst of their physical and mental deterioration, the conflict vis-à-vis familial obligation and putting his life on hold, his fear, irritation and the unresolved family conflicts that resurfaced.
>
> It reminded me that my time is not so far at hand, because although I do not think of my parents as old, they are growing older. These days I can see a silver-haired gentleman jogger coming down the street I grew up on and not recognize him from a distance as my father---surely that senior citizen is not my dad! In those brief moments of dissociation, I forestall time.
>
> But when the recognition occurs and the connection is made, for the slightest of instants there is a feeling akin to dread. I wonder to myself, am I ready to inherit the earth?

Appreciating others' meaning systems

An awareness that others have differing meaning systems is essential to an appreciation of the life cycle and a necessary transformation for many students. A 52-year old Catholic priest wrote:

> As this course draws to an end I am noticing the ever-ongoing change that has begun to take deeper root in me. I knew I needed to work on authentic empathy and respect for others and their position and I have known that for some time. Part of my inability to resolve that was my fear of compromising the truth as I know it and so deeply believe it. And yet, that very fear was what was crippling my ability to communicate with those who most wanted and needed to be heard and validated in their struggle.
>
> What I have noticed is my response is beginning to change, really change. *I am beginning to focus on the "meaning making" of others.* As I try to discern that, it inevitably helps me to understand them and respect them and truly empathize with them much better than before.

Awareness of the High Cost of Transformation

A 45-year-old graduate student reflected on her own growth in light of the object relations theory of Kegan (1982):

> Whether it is framed as "the duality of human experience" or as a crisis between the competitive "yearnings for communion and agency," the need to move from one state of being to another drives us toward growth. I have recently experienced this drive toward separation from my own "culture of embeddedness" only to return again with a new perspective. This has been a

readily apparent struggle with me for most of the past ten years. . . ..The need to balance the needs for independence and mutuality is the driving force behind the process we call growth. Growth happens in and of the process, within and between the stages. . .I have been profoundly affected and see my ability to see change as vital. . .

Another middle-aged woman described the discomfort of her own new awarenesses:

I think this class has helped me and hurt me at the same time. Feelings I haven't faced for a while have come up, but I've tried to examine them and to come to conclusions that I can live with.

Conclusion

To understand what happens for students whose learning involves transformation and new perspectives, we need to examine the process from "inside" (the anthropological "emic"). In the above examples, students were keenly aware that they were shifting perspectives and finding new meaning. These qualitative data can lead us to several conclusions. Taken as a whole, it is clear that adult learning is a dynamic process. It involves differentiation--separation from what one knew before--and reconnection—seeing things in a new light. Biographical data commingle with content which is directly related to human growth and aging. The discourse of the classroom provides the social environment for change, for object "discovery" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).[1] Principles of object relations help the educator understand the emergence of new meaning-making (Kegan, 1999, 1990). As we relect on the

[1] Berger and Luckmann observe, ". . .I know that others share at least part of this knowledge, and they know that I know this. My interaction with others in everyday life is, therefore, constantly affected by our common participation in the available social stock of knowledge" (1967, p. 41) In sharing, we objectify our reality.

significance of this process, we stand in awe of the affective and cognitive power embedded in our work. And we more fully appreciate the nature of human development in the process of aging.

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